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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses how technical processes can deceive us and how college educators and social scientists must be especially sensitive to the dangers of technology when conducting research and proposing applications from research. As technology and bureaucratic controls have grown, so too have the demands for specialized knowledge in many areas. A particular technique or knowledge becomes quite meaningful for people within academic disciplines or specialized work environments. While technique attempts to bring efficiency to all matters, it also brings a specialized meaninglessness. With serious, sometimes threatening tones, educators and workers attempt to puff themselves up with the rhetoric of their activities. For example, when humans create technical forms of work to support other technical operations, they usually adopt a supporting language to bolster their existence and inflate their status. Psychologists have created such a language for themselves. Often times, a self-destructive process of isolation sets in. Another problem of concern to educators brought on by this specialized meaninglessness is "what does our research data mean and how should we use it?" For example, it is now possible to read about two or more economic theories based on sophisticated data tabulations which explain with great self-confidence that the national economy will be going respectively in two or more directions. Who is right? There are two major areas of concern here: contrived manipulation and the inability to get and understand all available data. Researchers are always dangerously close to a specialized meaninglessness because they can never have command of all possible situations or circumstances. (RM)

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Specialized Meaninglessness:
A Source of Truth in the Technical Age

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Abstract

This essay attempts to explain in some definite terms how our technical process can deceive us. Educators must be especially sensitive to the dangers of technology when conducting research and proposing universal or limited applications from research. Examples and warnings are provided to indicate the nature of a specialized meaninglessness. Some special warnings and concerns are also provided to the professional researcher. Moreover, this paper is a series of warnings regarding the technical process and higher education.

Specialized Meaninglessness:
A Source of Truth in the Technical Age

Nearly forty years ago Aldous Huxley said that intensive specialization tends to reduce each branch of science to a condition almost approaching meaninglessness. Huxley was describing a situation that is now a major problem for all specialists. Graduate students, as an example, understand this tedious process as they complete their specialized studies. Frequently, they perpetuate a form of specialized meaninglessness learned in graduate school by attempting to legitimize it in various ways (e.g., relying on specialized studies and terms, inventing new words like Andragogy, and politicizing their trivial professional concerns). This same formal routine of fatuous nonsense is also practiced in government bureaucracy and within business enterprises. It seems to be a universal technical ritual. Speaking a sophisticated type of nonsense is professionally fashionable.

As our technology and bureaucratic controls have grown, with them have come obstreperous demands for specialized knowledge in many areas. There is hardly an area of work within developed countries where exacting technology is excluded. Highly specialized technical knowledge has been developed to address and possibly control many human problems. This knowledge

comes from knowing a technique or way of performing certain exacting tasks. A particular technique or knowledge becomes quite meaningful for people within academic disciplines or specialized work environments. While technique attempts to bring efficiency to all matters, it also brings, with its exuberance, a new and involved truth from the technical age, a specialized meaninglessness.

Specialized meaninglessness is masked by an aura of professionalization and a compulsion for control within large bureaucratic organizations. With serious, sometimes threatening tones, educators, bureaucrats, and technicians within industry attempt to puff themselves up with the rhetoric of their narrow, pernicious activity. It is a way to maintain control and intimidate the innocent. This is done many times with an earnest but misplaced devotion to some hollow, perfidious technical concept or technique. People become tied to a way of doing their work, and they come to believe, with a passionate intensity, in the rhetoric of their specialized meaninglessness. This special rhetoric is developed within work disciplines and is sometimes referred to as "speaking the language," e.g., computer language, statistical language, et al.

When humans create technical forms of work to support other technical operations, they usually adopt a supporting language to bolster ^{their} existence and inflate their status. To be recognized as a professional, one must know and understand

a professional language. Psychology, a relatively new and somewhat synthetic discipline within social science, has created a specialized language structure to support its existence. But as this language has been developed and extended, only certain psychologists with specialized interests can use the terms in a way that is professionally meaningful. Each division and subdivision of psychology have their unique language requirements. Cognitive theorists speak a different language from stimulus - response theorists and so on. In some ways psychology, along with many other highly specialized technical fields, return us to magical interpretations of the universe that chain the human mind to idyllic divisions of knowledge. These numerous disciplines frequently attempt to project either a higher order knowledge or low grade magic to the world. They often become confused and anxious within their logical nonsense classifications. Sometimes obsessive outbursts can be observed similar to children trying to get their way.

William Barrett advises that, "At certain points we do well not to press on in our mania for logical consistency if we are to grasp the substance of what the living occasion brings us." In other words, we may get lost or overwrought within our exacting conventions and phrases and become petrified within a unique paradigm of self-assuredness. It is like a self-hypnosis with words that can result in a frozen state of compelling nonsense. A self-destructive process of isolation sets in.

The problems of scientific and technological narrowness are understood but ignored by many serious thinkers within the University environment. Professors continue to export their specialized scientific view into a society that can barely cope with the available technology. Thinkers and researchers with courage and independence are needed to solve problems without complicating matters. This requires some strong mediating force like Reason linked to purpose. Huxley made the point that science has developed a method which works almost independent of the people by whom it is operated: "Men and women with only enough intelligence to do what they are told and only the devotion required to come to work on time can, by using the method, extend and apply scientific knowledge." This contributes to an inertia of science and technology that often defies control and thoughtful execution. So some products of technology get out of hand, and we have Love Canals or Three Mile Island catastrophes. Technology in many areas is a dangerous meaningless exercise, if we cannot control it.

A major problem, and one not likely to be solved, is that we do not yet understand the limits of our technical knowledge. Every technical process has a definite limit in terms of its usefulness. These limits may not make a particular technology abundantly helpful. Nuclear power plants seem to be a good example of this. We too often launch our technical ways beyond our human limits. In most cases technical limits are related to human capabilities and needs.

The struggle for unified meaning in a technical age is too often neglected or abandoned by well-meaning people who have forgotten their obligation to remain free. Technology defines and confines at the same time. Freedom is restricted. Henri Bergson speaks of an education not being properly assimilated if it appeals to memory rather than to judgment. A parasitic technical self can quickly develop without ever having understood true freedom. Technology introduces this process to individuals, and they suddenly find it difficult to step away from their satanic creations and taut behavior. They are apt to perish with their destructive devices, e.g., nuclear weapons may kill all of us.

Technique is subtly being dictated to us as a simplistic means for understanding complex problems. As an example, there are numerous government officials and word smart commentators who believe the anti-nuclear movement in this country is harmful to our national interests in negotiations with Russia on weapons reductions. This same type of argument was used in an attempt to silence the anti-Vietnam War movement. The fact is that a concerned free population within a democratic framework can exert considerable common sense to force balloon-headed technocrats to back off. From another perspective, should citizens in this country completely trust a government that within a decade gave us Vietnam lies and Watergate corruption, an extra special form of specialized meaninglessness?

Free people must speak out in order to ^{remain} free, and they must have knowledge of deceptions in order to make adjustments with their truth. It is an individual process that collectively can make a difference. When a government driven by technology fails to be held strictly accountable to its citizens, then a small abuse of power can be magnified through technology to affect the entire nation. This is a simple truth, but as Eric Hoffer has said, the simple is not easy to understand.

It is due to technology that our struggle for meaning in the world is now severely hampered by inimical obstructions and distorted perspectives of human events. Technology offers a unique opportunity for political specialists to impose their peevish technical nonsense as truth. Adolf Hitler attempted to reconstruct history on a grand scale to suit his perverted politics. In this country, the government often attempts to project favored political priorities as truth through naive, mean spirited intellectuals and other nonsense bloated phonies. Bureaucrats of government do this frequently but so do educators, news commentators, and technical bureaucrats within private industry. What happens is that technology or the synthesis of certain techniques can channel our behavior to the extent that we become dependent on a particular way of life devoid of thoughtful, questioning, reflective activity. This has happened to people prior to the development of high technology,

but now this process is much more pervasive and insidious due to the deceptive nature of technical means. Truth is never easy to develop, and we often get ourselves ensnarled or trapped attempting to sort out a proper version of truth. William Carlos Williams has presented this same thought within different words: "We fix ourselves in orders of being and think that that is the end of us."

As technology has created more complicated (and sometimes phoney) lines of reasoning, there is more competition for truth. As an example, it is now possible to hear two or more economic theories based on sophisticated data tabulations explain with great self-confidence that the national economy will be going respectively in two or more different directions. Who is right? No one really knows, because economic theorists use, selectively, data they believe to be important for their preconceived truths. This is the case in psychology, education, sociology, political science, and it is also the case in physics and chemistry. A scientist, but more likely a technologist, depends on restrictive, filtered technical information to formulate what will happen in the world. Sometimes this works and sometimes it does not. There are two major problems. One is the sinister aspect of contrived manipulation; the other is an inability to get and understand all available data. Abraham Kaplan said, "Science always simplifies; its aim is not to reproduce the reality in all its complexity, but only to formulate what is essential for understanding, prediction, or control."

We now have intense specialized meaninglessness from technology, because it is difficult for competing truths to validate themselves. This means that when a large chemical company says there are no dangers to the public from their waste dumps, because their scientists have calculated and checked all the possible risks, people are still skeptical. Other scientists are obtained to demonstrate there are serious risks. Who is right?

When our government officials say Russia has such and such advantage in nuclear weapons, and therefore we must not think of freezing nuclear warhead production unilaterally, are they truthful? The Soviet Union says we have a nuclear weapons advantage. Can anyone ever have a clear advantage when each side has nearly 30,000 warheads? If there is not going to be a thoughtful discussion on nuclear weapons to freeze and reduce warheads, then we are doomed to listen to government nonsense in the form of an official truth. This is an absurd situation. There is no such thing as an official truth, but there are many enunciated official truths.

This specialized meaninglessness is now more dangerous than ever before, because technology provides many options, and with them separate competing truths, that make it near impossible at times to know what should be done. In a technical environment, knowledge is most critical to the decision making process, because missing a small variable can quickly cause a major problem. Also, massing a lot of unneeded information gives the

false impression of knowledge security, i.e., we believe we know more than we do. So there is the problem of understanding or knowing what we know, and this concern must now take priority over all other concerns. Educators should be most sensitive to this epistemological problem within the technical era. What does our data mean and how should we use it?

From the perspective of a sociology of knowledge, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann contend that the analysis of the role of knowledge in the dialectic of individual and society, of personal identity and social structure, provides a crucial complementary problem. In other words, it is difficult to understand what people know and how they know. Technology does not always help with this problem.

Machines that sort and manipulate data do speed processing, but they cannot make decisions related to human priorities. Many times it would be better for humans to expend the effort and do the work a computer can do in order to slow down and understand the problem. Computers compress and simplify complex human problems by equating all observed characteristics to symbols. This frequently results in fruitless perplexity. When a computer is used to help solve problems, it often provides vexing, misleading answers which produce more applied technology. Miguel de Unamuno said the aim of life is to structure an architecture within the soul. For technologists, the aim of life is to structure an architecture around the soul.

It is a fact that technology many times attempts to make something out of nothing. Taking a careful look at all aspects of life and measuring details down to a nit's eyebrow often identifies nothing of value, but within this grand process we might think a contribution is being made. Our elegant method takes over, and we keep establishing problems to preserve and enhance our sophisticated ways. Statistical methods, as an example, help researchers to create problems that are frequently developed within a vacuum of academic nonsense.

For the sake of research method, problems suddenly appear and many times flood us with a high-toned authoritarian meaninglessness. As a specific example, some well-known researchers in higher education are promoting research that demonstrates increased educational productivity (i.e., higher test scores, consistent application, and strong academic motivation) may be enhanced by having students segregated by sex, all male and all female schools. But when this segregation by sex process is accomplished, aggression and obsessive characteristics are also enhanced. Military academies, prior to the admission of women, are good examples of how this aggressiveness and obsessiveness can be fostered. Should we blindly accept and follow research findings in quest of educational productivity? Can we sacrifice some educational productivity for creativity, understanding, and emotional adjustment between sexes? Learning to live, study, and work in a heterogeneous environment may be

better for students' health than being harnessed and driven within a competitively designed system. These adjustment behaviors are just as legitimate and noble educational objectives as productivity for the sake of productivity. Our productivity is worthless, if we do not know how to use it and share it in a complex, frightened environment.

Wittgenstein said, "We make to ourselves pictures of facts." Our pictures are frequently collective distortions that can result in a legitimized meaninglessness. Industrialists frequently use the high-handed phrase "A loss of worker productivity in America" to obscure their own greed and mismanagement practices.

It is not so much a matter of ignoring research findings as it is a matter of understanding these findings. This is a major problem. Knowing the elements of certain research with humans is never complete or accurate. There are always varied social patterns at work within nature that can produce distorted and unexpected findings from a human derived theoretical model. It is a problem of constantly refining research methods and theoretical perspectives then checking on ourselves. The researcher is always dangerously close to a specialized meaninglessness, because, like everyone else, he or she can never have command of all possible situations or circumstances. This simple, direct statement is at the heart of scientific skepticism expressed by Paul Feyerabend, Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and Karl Popper.

We must be extremely cautious when making applications of raw research data. Our truth in a scientific setting must always be scrupulously monitored to find new truths. Serious researchers understand this point, and they frequently remind themselves to be alert for the unexpected and unknown. Researchers must always be aware that there are no absolutes in nature, only refinements which sometimes approach an absolute state but can quickly oscillate back to wild unpredictability. It is a deceptive process within a dynamic state. Thus, specialized meaninglessness, an exaggerated term, is a proper term, because we are usually dealing with some degree of meaninglessness within our truths. This should be the starting point for all scientific research, but most times it is not. Many scientists never understand this point, and others understand it late in their careers, from a tragic experience. The humble approach to scientific investigation is a more productive, rewarding approach.

A good physician understands very well that no one is ever cured. We may recover from an illness to certain degrees, but we must continue with the life struggle and adjust to maintain the physiology of our damaged nervous system. Technology is never going to completely cure anything; it will allow us to speed recovery in some respects, but at the expense of other adjustments.

A good example of specialized meaninglessness at work on complicated human problems is the case of systems theory being applied to the Vietnam War. In the early and mid-1960s, the

Robert S. McNamara Defense Department, then full of eager, ambitious, young scientists, drugged with system theory nonsense, attempted to impose their concepts on military as well as political doctrine. The results were tragic. Whenever grand systems are used on human problems, something is always unknown. That something is the elusive human spirit, in this case, displayed by the North Vietnamese and dedicated anti-war movement groups in the United States. It was the combination of these two tenacious elements that prevented an egotistical and extremely powerful man from staying in power. President Lyndon B. Johnson could not run for re-election in 1968 due to the anti-Vietnam War coalition. A mobilized, spirited people stopped the most powerful person in the United States. This outcome was not predicted or calculated by the machine smart systems thinkers.

Systems theory tends to create a feeling of false omnipotence in the people using it. They do relatively little work for their manufactured picture of the world, but they are capable of producing lyrical sounding grand schemes of nonsense through technology. A magical destructive synthesis is created, and it can project false promises and false issues for action. This can always occur when people screen their information through machines in hopes of enhancing its value. Karl Popper reminds us that there are all kinds of sources of our knowledge but none has authority.

When we search for a superior knowledge through technical means, there is a tendency to filter out major problems so that the available data can be "properly" handled. Hans Reichenbach has put it this way: "The search for certainty is one of the most dangerous sources of error because it is associated with the claim of a superior knowledge." In the case of the Vietnam War, who had superior knowledge, the United States or North Vietnam? The United States thought superior knowledge came with superior technical equipment and a righteous global view. North Vietnam was not in awe of superior technical equipment, and they had their own righteous truth. They were able to slay a modern technical Goliath with diligent application and unswerving commitment. These human characteristics were capable of breaking through and maybe breaking down temporarily a fixation on technical process and reliance on meaningless technique.

Within the human spirit is an unknown dimension of vigor and creativity that has the capacity to counter technical meaninglessness. Montaigne expressed this thought when he said, "A spirited mind never stops within itself; it is always aspiring and going beyond its strength; it has impulses beyond its powers of achievement. If it does not advance and press forward and stand at bay and clash, it is only half alive. Its pursuits are boundless and without form; its food is wonder, the chase, ambiguity."

The combination of spirit matched with purpose and diligent application may reduce our technical problems to something less threatening and more manageable than what we now have. This will take a national effort of informed unity based on hard work and consistent application. Educators should be in the forefront of this effort.